

From Soft Power to Hard Power: Turkey's New Middle East Approach

For recent two decades, Turkish foreign policy has been characterized by soft power elements. From cultural motives to religious proximity, Turkey has created good relations with its neighbors and the international community. Moreover, Turkish cultural and aid institutions have also created a good impact in different areas of international geopolitics. The impact that Turkey created through TV series and movies in accordance with some educative programs and tourist appeal, offered Turkey to create good relations with the rest of world. Thereby, Turkey has increased its cultural impact from southeast European societies to Asian and MENA regions.

Since 2002 when the Ak Party became the powerful party in the scheme of the politics in Turkey, the Middle East has been the key interest of the new Turkish foreign policy. Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his foreign policy team were instrumental which made Turkey a key player in the region. The popularity of the Turkish leader Erdogan and the vision of the Turkish NGOs were very influential in making Turkey one of the most effective regional powers.

The Arap Spring was seen as a good opportunity for Turkish foreign policy to spread the new Turkish vision in the region. Erdogan and Davutoglu played a very important role in order to increase Turkish potency in the region via new democratic and Islamic rhetoric. However, mass protests ended up with civil wars in the region and Turkish regional projections were in danger. The following crackdown in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria had a negative effect in Turkish foreign policy. After a while, terror organizations like ISIS and PYD/YPG has been activated in the region. Turkish peaceful soft power policy turned out to be security-oriented policies.

The Turkish policy of more democracy in MENA region and the local people's demand for more liberty, equality before the law and economic benefits started to vain. Instead, the disintegration of the states in Syria and Iraq has created uncertainty and undermined the constructive cooperation opportunities.

Turkey's approach towards local people in the region is most of the time accepted as a challenge to the international and the regional status-quo powers. The Turkish vision of integration with the local people and societies has therefore created doubts in its allies like the EU and the US.

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What we see in these days regarding Turkey's Middle East policy is a new strategy. In this context, Turkey wants to create strong alliances and liable governments near its borders. For this reason, Turkey follows a security strategy which aims to secure inside by securing the outside. The military training base in Somali, Qatar's military base and now Sudanese Sevakin island create new opportunities for Turkey in the region. Turkey has now become a key player in the Red Sea area as well as in the Gulf region.

The Red Sea carrying more than 50% of the international trade is one of the most important seas in the world. The goods produced in Asia, especially in China, Japan, South Korea and India is being transported to Europe through the Red Sea. This fact makes the Turkish deployment in the region very important not only in local politics but also in world economics and geostrategy. Moreover, Turkish military existence in this area, increases Turkey's political impact in international geopolitics.

On the other hand, the growing Turkish military industry is another significant point. Firstly, Euphrates Shield Operation and Operation Olive Branch have provided Turkey with hard power elements. These have increased Turkey's ability for regional and international military maneuvers and entrenched its post of confidence trust for different regional powers.

The determination of this new Turkish strategy has become necessary related to some international and regional developments. Donald Trump's Middle East strategy, especially in northern Syria, and the US's relations with the PYD/YPG terrorist organization induce Turkey to continue without any support from its

allies despite the troubles. In contrast, the US, the EU and almost all Arab countries including Saudi Arabia and Egypt are having different visions in the region.

The Mediterranean and new oil politics is another critically important point in Turkey's new policy in the region. The intensification of relations between Egypt and Greece has created a new balance of power on the one hand and increased political tension in the region on the other. Here is the Red Sea and new Turkish initiatives are in question again.

After the Arab Spring, a new situation emerged regarding the politics which complicates Turkey's threat perception and security policies. Due to these factors, Turkey has become more active in the region and began to use harder tools according to new international circumstances.

Despite the fact that Turkey's allies are sometimes on the opposite side as in the Cold War period, Turkey still continues to be strong and stable towards its allies. But this doesn't mean that Turkish foreign policy is not to quest indigenous and independent politics.